Remaking Impostors: from Martin Guerre to Sommersby

By Natalie Zemon Davis

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INTRODUCTION TO

NEW HAYES ROBINSON LECTURE SERIES

by

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Each year in March, a distinguished overseas historian is invited to give a public lecture at Royal Holloway. Former speakers include Lawrence Stone, David Cannadine, Simon Schama, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Peter Brown. The event is organised by the History Department under the terms of a benefaction from the estate of Margaret Hayes Robinson, who was a much-loved Head of Royal Holloway's History Department (1899-1911) in the days when higher education for women was still being pioneered.

The new series of lectures, inaugurated in 1992, has become a popular occasion in the College's annual timetable. Recent meetings have attracted over 200 friends of the Department. To our pleasure, these include many former students from both Royal Holloway and Bedford Colleges, as well as colleagues from an array of Universities and schools within the London area - and numerous guests from the local community in Egham. So successful have the lectures become that the Department has now decided to publish the texts. This lecture by Natalie Zemon Davis, presented at Royal Holloway in March 1995, provides a scintillating launch for the new Hayes Robinson Lecture series.

To encounter ***Natalie Zemon Davis****, for many years Professor at Princeton University, is to be aware immediately that you have met a person who is full of ideas, energy, and zest. She is an expert on the history of France and Europe. And, within that, she studies the unexpected and the unsung. Thus she has written about ghosts, witches, rioters, rebels, apprentices, and, most recently, three seventeenth-century women "on the margins" who travelled the world.*

The best-known of her books, ***The Return of Martin Guerre*** *(Harvard U.P., 1983), has inspired two films and now an opera. That study focused upon the fate of a notorious French impostor. Or was he the real Martin Guerre? This lecture takes the subject further, to reconsider the general theme of imposture in history and film.* ***Natalie Zemon Davis*** *is the remarkable historian-detective who can unravel and depict the mysteries of human behaviour.*

At New Year's holiday in 1979, a man identifying himself as a local Communist Party official phoned the Shanghai Arts Theatre to ask for a ticket for the son of an old time revolutionary, now in the general headquarters in Beijing. The troupe manager agreed warmly even though there were no more tickets. Shortly after a young man arrived at the theatre dressed in a worn army uniform, a perfect sign of attachment to the ascetic values of the People's Liberation Army. Speaking with a Beijing accent, he gave his name as Li Xiaoyong. He saw the play from one of the best seats in the house.

After the performance, the director approached Li Xiaoyong and said he would like to visit him the next day. The young man insisted that he tell him tell him right then what was on his mind. The director asked in a lowered voice whether Li would pass on his request for more spacious living quarters to the Party official who had phoned earlier on his behalf. Li promised to do so. The next day, the troupe manager, who had told Li Xiaoyong he could come to a performance any time, approached him also with a request for the Party official. Could his son be transferred from the coal mine where he worked back to Shanghai to help him in his ill-health? Li said he would do all he could.

And so a pattern was established for Li Xiaoyong, who found his way into other theatres in Shanghai, into the home of an important actress, and into the Spring Tea for all the literary and artistic talent of Shanghai. These affairs might be preceded by a confirmatory phone call from the local Party official or even from the young man's father in Beijing, and they were always followed by requests to Li for help from the Party or from influential people for better housing, for better theatre roles, for transfers of children from country jobs back to Shanghai and more. Now and again Li's new friends would receive a call from an official saying that he had been informed of the matter and that it was difficult to arrange or risky to pursue.

By springtime, Li had acquired the use of the automobile belonging to the Party secretary of the University of Shanghai–a scarce and prestigious item in that world of pedestrians and bicycles– had become engaged to a charming young actress, and

was living at her family's home. Since her father had been a capitalist in the old days, the family was delighted with this connection to a revolutionary lineage. Li helped raise the stock of his fiancé's brothers by simply appearing at their school and factory.

Then in the spring of 1979, Li Xiaoyong approached a Party official directly to get his fiancée transferred to a better theatrical unit. Suspicious of this young man driving around town honking his horn, the Party investigated and discovered he was really Zhang Longquan, the son of an ordinary family of Shanghai, back in the city for a holiday from his unwelcome job in the countryside at East Wind Farm. The imposture had begun when he failed to get theatre tickets at New Year's, and he gradually created a new life for himself. He was arrested on April 6, 1979.[1]

Nine years later in Princeton, New Jersey, the admission office of Princeton University received an application from one Alexi Santana, describing himself as a fatherless eighteen-year-old cowboy on a Utah ranch, who had read an impressive list of books and had broken several records as a middle-distance runner. His results on the college entrance exams were high, and he exuded intelligence when he came to the University for an interview. The University admitted Alexi Santana with fellowship aid of about $40,000 promised for his four years.

Santana arrived in Princeton only in autumn 1989, having asked for permission to take care of his dying mother in Switzerland for a year. Now he called himself Alexi Indris-Santana, his late mother's name added to his father's. He was a success at Princeton, getting excellent grades in difficult courses and running for the University track team. His wide circle of friends enjoyed his tales of exotic travel and adventure, and he won membership in the Ivy Club, one of Princeton's oldest and most exclusive eating clubs.

In February of his second year at Princeton, he ran in the Harvard-Yale-Princeton track meet. A Yale student recognized his face from a track meet in California some six years before. There he had the name of Jay Mitchell Huntsman and had won

[1] This account is taken from an annotated manuscript narrative prepared and translated by Ann Anagnost from the *Wenhui bao* (*Wenhui Daily*) and the *Jiefang ribao* (*Liberation Daily*) of 11 September 1979. Ann Anagnost is a member of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Illinois.

the Stanford Invitational Open cross-country race. But, the Yale runner reported, he was not qualified to be in that competition, for he was not a student at Stanford. Rather, as he described himself, he was a sixteen-year-old orphan from a commune in Nevada, who had been trying to enroll in a Palo Alto High School so as to qualify for admission to Stanford. However well he ran, a sportswriter had written in the California press, he was not entitled to be the winner.

Ten days after the Harvard-Yale-Princeton track meet in 1991, the Princeton police arrested James Arthur Hogue alias Alexi Indris-Santana. His past life was as extravagant as any of the stories with which he had regaled the Princeton students. Born in Kansas City, Kansas of parents who were still alive, he was ten years older than he had claimed in applying to Princeton. Toward the end of a successful career as a student and track star in Wyoming and Texas, he had dropped out of university and turned to a life of petty theft and imposture. The year that he had supposedly spent caring for his dying mother in Switzerland, he had in fact been serving ten months of a five-year prison sentence in Utah for possession of stolen property. Now in New Jersey, he was indicted for swindling thousands of dollars of fellowship funds as well as forgery and falsifying records to get into Princeton.[2]

These two accounts from different sides of the world cross oceans, languages, and national boundaries with ease. We can all admire the talents of these young men: Zhang Longquan so good at acting and taking on different voices and accents over the telephone, so able to converse with theatre people and artists; James Arthur Hogue, so accomplished in his academic skills–at exams, in classes–so swift a runner, so fascinating a raconteur.

And yet in each case, the details of the imposture are quite specific to their time and place, and part of our interest in them comes from this historical depth and embeddedness. Zhang/Li in his worn army uniform claimed not a royal but a

[2] *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, 3 April 1991, pp. 5-7. *New York Times*, 26 April 1991. Interestingly enough, the National Collegiate Athletic Association decided that the races in which Santana/Hogue had placed for Princeton would continue to count for the University. He had misused the University's funds but, at the time he ran, he was a student at Princeton and thus eligible to be in the race (telephone conversation with the Princeton University Athletics Department, 22 January 1997).

revolutionary lineage; sought not an inheritance, but a life-style and connections; and played on the belief in "influence" in a Communist society. Indeed, Zhang/Li's performance was a parody of Communist fixing and favours, a revelation of how foolish was trust in influence. After his unmasking, the *Wenhui Daily* did a cartoon of him as a gift-taking fox in a Liberation Army uniform, wily but also possessed of the Chinese "fox-spirit," which represents the desires of others.[3]

Hogue/Santana's habit of imposture developed when the United States had an actor at its helm (Ronald Reagan), and the young man used deception to acquire a prized item in late twentieth-century America: education at an elite university. His performance was a parody of current admission policies at an institution like Princeton. He genuinely had the qualities Princeton traditionally sought in its male students: brains and athletic skills. As a supposed self-taught cowboy with an exotic last name, he spuriously had the qualities Princeton was looking for to make its undergraduate body more diverse. Hogue/Santana puts in doubt the American belief in achievement by merit. After his imposture was revealed, some of his classmates still asserted his virtue, saying he was like Victor Hugo's Jean Valjean, a talented man who had committed small crimes out of need and now wanted to go straight.

These two cases prepare the way for our consideration of Martin Guerre and his remakers. My theme today is the universal appeal of an impostor story and yet its intense linkage with its own time. Both the difference from and likeness to ourselves give the story its charge. Each age remakes impostor tales to some extent to stress its own concerns, but if the tension between the universal and the historically specific is relaxed too much, the account loses in richness and resonance.

The tale of Martin Guerre has travelled across borders and centuries. Let me remind you of its outline.[4] A well-off young villager named Martin Guerre abandoned his wife, Bertrande de Rols, and new-born son in the Pyrenean village of Artigat in

[3] Anagnost, "The Narrative: 'An Impostor Falls into the Net," title page and n. 1.

[4] I have treated these events in Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

1548. Not a word was heard from him, and then eight years later he seemed to come back. His wife accepted the returned Martin as did his uncle, Pierre Guerre, now head of the family, his sisters, and the whole village. After three years of peaceable marriage and the birth of a daughter, quarrels broke out in Artigat, with one faction headed by Pierre Guerre denouncing the returned Martin Guerre as really Arnaud du Tilh, alias Pansette, an impostor from a village in Gascony. Support for Pierre's view came from a soldier passing through Artigat, who said the real Martin Guerre had lost his leg up north two years before in the battle of Saint Quentin. Bertrande and her sisters-in-law led the faction defending the man in her bed as her husband.

Suddenly in 1560, Bertrande seemed to change her mind, assenting to a complaint that the man she was living with was not Martin Guerre, but Arnaud du Tilh, alias Pansette. All during the trials at Rieux and Toulouse, Bertrande claimed she had been tricked for three years or more; yet every story she told about the past of Martin Guerre, the accused man in chains was able to repeat. The high court at Toulouse was about to declare he was in fact Martin Guerre when a man with a wooden leg arrived at the court. He was recognized as the long-lost husband by Bertrande de Rols, even while the accused in chains was still claiming to be Martin Guerre. Arnaud du Tilh confessed to his imposture only at the last minute, before he was hanged and burned at the stake in Artigat. Bertrande de Rols and Martin Guerre resumed life as a couple.

All kinds of listeners have appreciated this plot line, the departure and the return, the recognition and the repudiation, and finally the arrival of the man on the wooden leg. All kinds of listeners have wondered at the the impostor and the wife. How could he have tricked her for three years or more? Sixteenth-century observers, that is, the Toulouse judge who recommended sentence and a young lawyer at the court, admired Arnaud du Tilh's memory and eloquence, both needed qualities for men of the law, even while condemning him as a "prodigious offender." "I do not remember having read of any man who had so successful a

memory," said Judge de Coras. "He seemed not merely to be recounting things to the judges," said lawyer Le Sueur, "but to make them come to life before their eyes."[5]

As for Bertrande de Rols, the sixteenth-century commentary, all of it male, described her formally as deceived, as women easily are "because of the weakness of their sex," but also spoke of her more suspiciously as "believing too lightly" and "perservering too long" in her error. The "easily deceived" topos made it possible for the court to free Bertrande of a charge of complicity in imposture and adultery, laying all the guilt on the dazzling Arnaud. In contrast, the phrase "believing too lightly" translated a troubling and muted suspicion that honorable women, as Bertrande was deemed to be, might decide to dispose of their bodies in their own way.

These various formulations are recognizable to us, but also particular to the sixteenth century. Many other features of the story have this double quality. Imposture in Artigat played out the need for husbands and heirs in a society rooted in fields, vineyards, and stable family forms. It was both easier and more difficult to carry off a change in persona than in our own day. Easier, because without fingerprints, photographs, and identity cards and often without the possibility of handwriting tests or the availability of painted portraits, identity could be proved mostly by memory. More difficult, because if one wanted to hold on to even a small patch of land and alliance in sixteenth-century France, one had to stay put. There was no sixteenth-century New World frontier to which French couples with children might remove for a respectable life under a new name. (In the seventeenth century, when New France was opened for settlement, rural lads went over on their own and took wives either among the Amerindian women or among poor single women shipped over from France for the purpose.) If Arnaud and Bertrande had decided to go to Calvin's Geneva in 1559, when quarrels began to brew, they would have arrived without the property they valued so much and without the pastoral

[5] Jean de Coras, *Arrest Memorable, du Parlement de Tolose, Contenat une histoire prodigieuse de nostre temps* (Lyon: Antoine Vincent, 1561), p. 64. Guillaume Le Sueur, *Admiranda historia de Pseudo Martino* (Lyon: Jean de Tournes, 1561), p. 12.

certification of good life needed to get on in the Reformed city.[6] Arnaud du Tilh's achievement was inserting imposture into the heart of stable village life.

After the eye-witness accounts of Coras and Le Sueur appeared in print, the Martin Guerre case was much commented on, and in ways that also show sixteenth-century preoccupations. Should Arnaud du Tilh have been punished by the death penalty? Michel de Montaigne was the only one to say "No": there were so many strange things about the case, such as how Arnaud knew all that he did, that Montaigne thought the Parlement of Toulouse should have withheld judgment. Other jurists congratulated Coras for his decision on the daughter that survived the intimacy of Arnaud du Tilh and Bertrande de Rols. She represented one of the worst threats of imposture in the early modern period, the blurring of the boundary that identified the legitimate child, and *only* the legitimate child, as heir, a boundary increasingly central to early modern beliefs about order and entitlement. Coras decided that since Bertrande believed that she was having intercourse with her husband when she conceived Bernarde–or at least the court decided to accept Bertrande's statement to that effect–Bernarde was legitimate. But her name became du Tilh and Arnaud's goods were adjudged to her.

The other branch of Martin Guerre commentary in the sixteenth century framed the case as "prodigious." The success of Arnaud du Tilh's imposture was likened to strange unusual events in nature: frightening comets, the metamorphosis of females into males, and uncanny resemblances. In all of this, the false Martin Guerre became larger than life.

In the most widely read seventeenth-century account, the tale of Martin Guerre was given another frame. Now it was one case in a broad category of "imposture." To be sure, Coras and Le Sueur had referred to impostors of the medieval and ancient world in the course of their recitals. Such figures could heighten the significance of a peasant tale: hadn't Jupiter dressed as Amphitryon to seduce the latter's wife? They could assist the legal assessment, say, of Bertrande's truthfulness: hadn't the

[6] There was, in fact, a trickster who appeared in Geneva in the 1570s, one Jean Allard, who went on to be a spectacular confidence man in Sweden, Italy, France, and other parts of Switzerland. But he lived on his own as a mere gardener in Geneva before turning to a nomadic life as a false financier. Simon Goulart, *Histoires admirables et memorables de nostre temps* (Paris: Jean Houzé, 1607), fols. 195b-99b.

daughter of the thirteenth-century Count Baldwin of Flanders always doubted the authenticity of the impostor Baldwin? But the general nature of imposture, of human falsity, was not the main concern of Coras and Le Sueur, but rather the creation of a man's identity and the difficulty of knowing what was true.

In the seventeenth century, after decades of struggle between rival religious claims, of witchcraft trials and demonological treatises, of political struggle with competing claimants to thrones, competing notions of good governance, and even some impostor kings (the false Edward VI in England of 1555 saying he had not died in 1553, the false king Sebastians of Portugal, saying in the 1580s-1590s that they had not died in 1578)–after these many events, the concept of imposture was advanced to cover all kinds of false pretensions and alleged tricks and deceptions. Already this categorization appears in a Protestant book of *Admirable and Memorable Stories* in the opening years of the century. In a section on "Strange Impostures," "Arnaut Tillet calling himself Martin Guerre" is sandwiched in among women claiming to have lived several months without food or drink and a ventriloquist who raised money for himself by projecting the voices of dead relatives from Purgatory.[7]

The full flowering of the genre was in *Les Imposteurs insignes*, Notable Impostors, of the Protestant jurist, historian and man of letters Jean Baptiste de Rocoles.[8] A native of the Languedoc, not so far away from Martin-Guerre country, he had left France for Amsterdam and Berlin well before the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes would have forced him as a Huguenot to flee. His book of more than forty impostors was published in Amsterdam in 1683, a mixture of false pretenders to royal succession in different lands (Perkin Warbeck claiming to be Richard III in England, the false Dmitry who claimed to be the tsarevich killed by Boris Godunov in 1591 and who actually ruled Russia from 1605-1606) and religious figures (Jan Bockelson, leader of the revolutionary Anabaptists of Munster; the recent false Messiah of the Jews

[7] Goulart, *Histoires admirables*, fols. 187a-199b; Natalie Zemon Davis, "From Prodigious to Heinous: Simon Goulart and the Reframing of Imposture," in André Burguière et al., eds., *Hommages à Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), pp. 274-83.

[8] Jean Baptiste de Rocoles, *Les imposteurs insignes ou Histoires de plusieurs homme de néant, de toutes Nations, qui ont usurpé la qualité d'Empereurs, Roys et Princes* (Amsterdam: Abraham Wolfgang, 1683).

Sabbatai Zevi, who had converted to Islam in 1666). "Arnaud du Thil, arch-deceiver" was the only figure in *Imposteurs insignes* pretending to no more than a peasant household, wife, and land, but Rocoles thought such a memorable imposture would give pleasure to his readers.[9] He then reproduced a short version of Coras's text, omitting the many annotations in which Coras complicated and added evidence to the story. Bertrande is almost fully a deceived and innocent woman. Arnaud is more simply a clever liar, his admirable qualities of memory and voice somewhat effaced. That the Court of Toulouse was on the verge of declaring him the real Martin Guerre when the man with the wooden leg appeared is left out. It is still a good tale, but the playfulness, complexity and self-doubt of the Coras account have been replaced by moralistic certainty, found elsewhere in Rocoles volume as well. (The chapter on the Sabbatai Zevi, for example, is followed by historical reflections on the just punishment of the Jews for stubbornly refusing to recognize that the Saviour had long since come.)[10]

It may well be Rocoles's simplified version fell into the hands of the philosopher Leibniz, for he referred to "the story of the false Martin Guerre" not long afterward in his essays on human understanding. Discussing the difficulty of acquiring the idea of individuation, Leibniz commented on how children do not automatically have "the precise idea of the individual." "A middling resemblance will easily deceive a child and make him take for his mother another woman who is not. You know the story of the false Martin Guerre, who deceived even the wife of the true one and his near relatives by resemblance together with skill."[11] Possibly if Leibniz

[9] Rocoles, *Imposteurs*, chap. 18.

[10] Rocoles's indignant tone is reproduced in the English translation of twelve of the figures in the *Imposteurs insignes* published in London in 1683 and 1686, during the political conflicts of the reign of James II. The anonymous translator says in the preface that these counterfeits cast light on the impostors current in England and goes on to attack major political and literary figures (Shaftesbury, Dryden) without naming them. *The Lives and Actions of Several Notorious Counterfeits* (London: William Whitwood, 1683 and 1686). The translator does not include the Martin Guerre case.

[11] Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (d. 1716), *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain* in *Oeuvres philosophiques* (Amsterdam and Leipzig: 1765), vol. 3, book 3, ch. 4.

had read the full text of Coras he would have decided it was not just confusion that made Bertrande and Martin's family accept a not-perfect-look-alike as the returned husband and heir.

Rocoles's book went into English and German translation, but by the eighteenth century the most popular conceptual frame for the Martin Guerre story had changed again. Two barristers before the Parlement of Paris, Gayot de Pitaval in 1734 and Richer in 1772, brought out a collection of *Causes célèbres*, of celebrated court cases, and the judgments that decided them.[12] The cases were eclectic: Martin Guerre, which opened the multiple volumes; a child claimed by two mothers; the trial of the seventeenth-century Marquise de Brinvilliers, who together with her lover poisoned her husband and family; inheritance cases; and more. Selling very well, the books reflected a taste beyond the legal profession for seeing the world in terms of the conflicts of law and the assessment of arguments. The reader was not marveling at or identifying with the prodigious as in the sixteenth century, was not being made indignant at deceptive impostures as in the seventeenth century, but was now invited to think like a judge and weigh his decision. In the first edition Gayot de Pitaval even took major political conflicts–such as the life and treason trial of Mary, Queen of Scots–and wrote them up as if the entire narrative could be constructed as a judicial case. Richer expressed his doubts about this in the second edition: such events should be described "in books devoted to the public history of nations," rather than being included in a collection about "the intrigues and interests of individual persons." In fact Gayot de Pitaval was feeling the pulse of the time well: historians of the eighteenth century have recently been showing us that publication of the arguments in civil and criminal cases was an important means for airing political ideas in a censored press.[13]

Both Gayot de Pitaval and Richer drew their Martin Guerre accounts from Coras, but provided their own narrative rather than a mere translation. They are the first of our remakers to make explicit the strong likelihood that Bertrande had not been

[12] F. Gayot de Pitaval, *Causes célèbres et intéressantes avec les jugement qui les ont décidées* (Paris: Jean de Nully, 1734); *Causes célèbres et intéressantes avec les jugemens qui les ont décidées. Rédigées de nouveau par M. Richer, ancien Avocat au Parlement* (Amsterdam: Michel Rhey, 1772).

[13] Sarah Maza, "Le Tribunal de la nation: Les Mémoires judiciaires et l'opinion publique à la fin de l'ancien régime," *Annales. E.S.C*, 42 (1987): 73-90.

deceived by Arnaud du Tilh: "many people will believe that Bertrande de Rols helped deceive herself, because the error pleased her," wrote Gayot. But their image of her was a timid woman, accepting Arnaud and then pushed around by Pierre, rather than taking any initiative herself. As for Arnaud du Tilh, they downplayed his dazzling skills. Rather than attributing Arnaud's extraordinary memory of the life of Martin Guerre to magic, as was the tempation of Jean de Coras once the man with the wooden leg had returned, Gayot and Richer attributed it first and foremost to Arnaud's having known Martin when they were soldiers together in Picardy and to Martin's having confided in him not only the facts of his family, but also "when he was drunk . . . all the mysteries hidden under the veil of married life."

The eighteenth-century authors put these words in Arnaud's mouth as his final confession, but they are not found in Coras's text (or in Le Sueur's for that matter), but only appear as a supposition suggested in the original complaint. In fact, Martin was a soldier in the Spanish armies, Arnaud in the French armies, and only Martin fought in the battle of Saint Quentin. At the trial, they both insisted that they had never known each other, Arnaud adding that he had been given some "secret information" ahead of time by other people. Le Sueur believed the two men were telling the truth and commented that this made Arnaud's imposture "mirabilis magis," all the more marvelous. For the eighteenth century lawyers, the extravagant wonder has been reduced.

In the Gayot-Richer version, the story of Martin Guerre traveled as far east as Russia in a late eighteenth century translation,[14] and as far west as America, where the *New London [Connecticut] Gazette* serialized it already in 1763-64. In 1787, the English poet and novelist Charlotte Smith translated it together with fourteen other cases from Gayot, publishing them under the title *The Romance of Real Life*.[15] No longer presented as a legal weighing of the world, the accounts were intended, so she said in her preface, to show that historical facts from every day life were as interesting as romantic fiction, an observation characteristic of the attitudes of her generation of women novelists.

[14] V.V. Novikov, *Teatr sudovedeniya* (Moscow: 1791), vol 5, pp. 138-48.

[15] Charlotte Smith, *The Romance of Real Life in Three Volumes* (London: T. Cadell, 1787), preface and vol. 2, ch. 4.

Charlotte Smith did not add her own views to her translation of the Martin Guerre case, and we have to wait until the twentieth century to find Bertrande de Rols interpreted by a woman. Janet Lewis, poet, writer and wife of the critic Ivor Winters, got interested in cases of circumstantial evidence when her husband's colleague in the Stanford English department was accused and convicted of a murder which she did not believe he had committed. She wrote a novel based on this case and two others where circumstantial evidence weighed heavily in the wrong direction. One of them was the Martin Guerre case, which she knew only from a truncated version, *Famous Cases of Circumstantial Evidence* by Alexandre Dumas père. What interested her was Bertrande, and in 1941 she published a compelling psychological novel, *The Wife of Martin Guerre*. There she imagined a Bertrande who had been deceived, who had begun to intuit the trickery, had wanted to stay with a man who was a better husband to her than the wife-beating and long-gone Martin, but had finally been pushed by her conscience to bring him to trial. Writing in 1982 in her eighty-third year, Janet Lewis said she had now read Coras and would have to tell the story differently, taking much more seriously the pressure put by Pierre Guerre on Bertrande to turn against Arnaud. But whatever her later thoughts, she was the first to dig deeply and imaginatively into the mind of the sixteenth-century village woman who had been talked about for so many centuries.[16]

In 1976, also out in California, I came across the story of Martin Guerre in the *Memorable Decree* of Jean de Coras. I was giving a graduate course at Berkeley on Family, Kin, and Social Structure in Sixteenth-Century France, and one of my students, doing a paper on adoption, had found the book in the Rare Book Library of the Law School.[17] I read it, and said to myself, "This has got to be a film." Here was a perfect story line, an intimate account of villagers and a look across class lines, from judges to peasants–just the kind of history I like to do. Here was a chance to show the specialness of the sixteenth-century past to millions of people who would not know of it otherwise.

[16] Janet Lewis, *The Wife of Martin Guerre* (San Francisco: Colt Press, 1941; *The Triquarterly*, 55 (Fall 1982): 104-10.

[17] The student was Ann Waltner. She went on to write an important book about adoption in China: *Getting an Heir: Adoption and the Construction of Kinship in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991).

Four years later I found myself sitting in Paris with the screen-writer Jean-Claude Carrière and the cinéaste Daniel Vigne remaking an impostor. My feminist consciousness, of a later generation than that of Janet Lewis, and my historian's belief that people in part make their own lives readied me to see Bertrande de Rols as an active agent and Arnaud du Tilh as more than a fascinating rogue. Carrière and Vigne brought their late twentieth-century Frenchmen's view of women as full companions, their admiration for a self-made man, and their expert knowledge of how much complexity could be packed into a film story. We all agreed that the evidence pointed strongly to Bertrande de Rols's complicity in the imposture, if not with full consciousness at the very beginning, then eventually with an open understanding between the two of them. We all agreed that good evidence was available to portray an Arnaud who had begun the imposture as a trickster, but had been captivated by his role as peasant householder and husband of Bertrande de Rols. We all agreed that the film could capture a momentary sense of possibility in the tight world of the sixteenth century.

The film, *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*, departs from the texts of Coras and Le Sueur in two important ways.[18] One I assented to and helped shape. At the end of the film, Martin Guerre and Arnaud du Tilh are presented as friends who had known each other at war, a situation which (as you have just read) was almost certainly not the case. I knew at the time that their prior friendship was found only in Bertrande's complaint as suppositious and that there was uncertainty about it expressed later in Coras's text. But at that early stage I was taken with Coras's annotation on betrayed friendship and thought it would make a dramatic confrontation between the two men. Only later did I discover the hitherto unknown text of the young lawyer Le Sueur, where the fact that the two had never met was emphasized. Only later did I track Martin Guerre's movements with the great Mendoza house in Spain and realize that the two had not fought in the same battle of Saint Quentin. And only later did I watch Gérard Depardieu playing Arnaud du Tilh playing Martin Guerre and realize that a truly successful imposture–one where like Arnaud you begin to believe you are the other person,

[18] For more detail on the making of the film, see Ed Benson, "Martin Guerre, the Historian and the Filmmakers: An Interview with Natalie Zemon Davis," *Film and History*, 13 (September 1983): 49- 65.

protesting that you are Martin Guerre even while the judges are sentencing you—only then did I realize that a truly successful imposture is more probable if you have never seen the original person. Like Gérard Depardieu, you create him from your gut.

The other departure from the historical record I opposed. In the film, Bertrande is not a plaintiff in the trial against the false Martin Guerre. The viewer thinks she may be for a time, but soon learns that her mark has been forged on the complaint. In the film trial, Bertrande does not play the double role evident in Coras's text, where she both says she has discovered she has been tricked *and* tells stories about Martin Guerre's past that Arnaud can always repeat. Instead the film Bertrande always supports the man accused of imposture as her true husband. I regretted this as a divergence from Coras's record, as a legal impossibility (the case would have instantly been thrown out of court if Bertrande had demonstrated that she had not signed the complaint), and as a weakening of Bertrande's agency. It threatened to create a nineteenth-century romantic Bertrande standing by her man rather than a legally vulnerable sixteenth-century village woman, who would seek a peaceable marriage if she could, but take precautions against accusations of adultery, or other threats to her life and that of her children. Jean-Claude Carrière thought it would make the story too complicated to represent the historical Bertrande; perhaps he also wanted to tip the weight in initiative and charisma to Arnaud. At any rate, I did my best to think of sixteenth-century lines for a film Bertrande who "supported her man" almost till it was too late, and told Carrière and Vigne that I had decided to write a historian's book about the case.

In that book (whose arguments have inevitably been underpinning this essay) I tried to construct by historical and anthropological means the lives and values of all four major village actors—Bertrande, Arnaud, Martin, and Pierre—and to make sense of the lives and the stories of Judge de Coras and lawyer Le Sueur. As I look back on the writing some fifteen years ago, I see that along with my concern about women and historical possibility, I was also interested in problems of identity as defined in late twentieth-century multi-cultural North America. The Basque background of the Guerre family played an important role in my account not only because my

loyalty to ethnographic method required it, but because ethnicity is something we think about and argue about in the United States and Canada. And as the granddaughter and great-granddaughter of Jewish immigrants to America, I've been concerned about self-fashioning all my life.

Martin Guerre is still an unfinished story. There is much that still can be said and is being said about it. Indeed, I plan one day to go back to Artigat and to cross the Pyrenees on Martin Guerre's trail to Burgos. Nonetheless Jean Claude Carrière, Daniel Vigne, and I were surprised to learn a few years ago from the newspapers that Jon Amiel was directing a Hollywood (Warner Brothers) international remake of *The Return of Martin Guerre*, set in the American South during the Reconstruction period after the Civil War. The script was written by Nicholas Meyer and Sarah Kernochan, Meyer describing the decision to remake as follows: "'Martin Guerre' did well in America. But people don't want to read subtitles, and when the studios talk box office they're talking millions, not thousands."[19]

The resulting film *Sommersby* is an imitation of parts of the visual apparatus of *The Return of Martin Guerre*, a following of some elements of the plot line, and an attempt to apply the psychological insights of the film and the book to the 1865-67 impostor and his wife in Tennessee. Laurel Sommersby has been stoutly maintaining the family plantation in the South during her husband's six years away fighting for the Confederacy. Presumed dead, the husband–or a man calling himself Jack Sommersby–returns and claims his place with her and their young son. In fact, he is a smart and somewhat educated trickster named Horace Townsend, who had spent part of the war in a prison cell with Sommersby and had seen him die in a fight after they were released. He is a much nicer man than the tough mean husband who had left, and Laurel, who suspects and gradually accepts the fact that he is a different man from Jack Sommersby, decides he's good enough for her, indeed, much to be preferred to her legal husband.

[19] Joan Dupont, "Nicholas Meyer and the Art of the Remake," *International Herald Tribune*, (2 June 1993).

Meantime, the false Sommersby is making himself into a better man than in his wastrel days and into a good planter. He imports tobacco into Tennessee and promises his white neighbours and the former plantation slaves, now sharecroppers, that they can purchase the land on which they work the new crop. The commitment to the blacks wins him the animosity of the Ku Klux Klan, one of whose leaders is also jealous of his relation to Laurel, whom he had hoped to wed. "Sommersby's" rival also gets evidence that Laurel's husband is an impostor. Suddently a murder charge is brought against the man called Sommersby for killing an acquaintance before the war. In a court presided over by one of the black Reconstruction judges, he accepts a death penalty for Sommersby's crime rather than claiming he is someone else. Thus, he will save his honour and Laurel's honour under his new name and protect the ownership of the tobacco land for the blacks. Laurel Sommersby weeps as he is executed.

There are many small questions one could raise about *Sommersby*. I went to see it with the Civil War/Reconstruction historian James McPherson, who commented on the unnecessary fuss in the film about planting tobacco in Tennessee: it had been grown there since the late eighteenth century and was a major export crop by the 1830s.[20] The murder charge against Jack Sommersby–killing a man who had struck him first during a drunken brawl over cards– would be transformed in a moment in a southern court into a manslaughter plea or less. And we noted how the film is "politically correct" in every direction: winning African-American support for the depiction of a black judge, if not always for the way it portrays the black sharecroppers; winning Southern-Confederate support by simultaneously representing the northerners who came down south for Reconstruction as rogues and scalliwags.

Such details are not important here. Similar reproaches can be made of any historical film, and I have made some about *The Return of Martin Guerre* itself. Rather I would ask the more significant question with which I opened this essay. Is

[20] Robert E. Corlew, *Tennessee. A Short History*, 2nd ed. (Knoxville, Tenn.: 1981), p. 228.

the Martin Guerre plot–that is, a plot embedded in issues of property, heirship, and bastardy, enacted in a society without ample frontiers for new village lives, and where memory is the main guarantee of identity–is such a plot transportable to the Reconstruction South? Or rather, is it interestingly transportable? Do not such specifics, redressed in 1860s garb, put a damper on the fiery questions of identity and imposture in nineteenth-century America and in the post-war South? The universal appeal of the impostor story gets bogged down, as one reviewer said, in a film "about worn-out land, crop rotation, and fertilizer."[21]

Now great impostor stories have been told about nineteenth-century America, and they could make films to attract millions of viewers. One is the last novel of Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man*, published in 1857; the other is a late novel published by Mark Twain in the 1890s: *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Both are about an America in which the showmanship of P.T. Barnum was a model for advancement; in which there were spaces for white people–and sometimes African-Americans–to pick up, move and forge new identities; in which social mobility and accompanying doubt were a central experience. Samuel Clemens/Mark Twain owned an 1882 book *Impostors and Adventurers. Noted French Trials*, which started off with "The False Martin Guerre." But in his *Huckleberry Finn*, he did not reproduce an inappropriate plot, but in the King and the Duke created impostors and adventurers with a American resonance.

Pudd'nhead Wilson is on an even hotter theme, one agitating southern consciousness more than whether the man returning to head the plantation was really the former master. It is about the fluid border in actual experience and looks between black and white, about passing and identity–a subject that fueled numerous novels and stories in the late nineteenth century. In *Puddn'head Wilson*, set before the Civil War, two infants resemble each other because they both have the same father, the owner of the plantation; but the mother of one is an almost white house slave, of the other the late mistress of the plantation. Roxy the slave substitutes her son for the mistress's son when they are babies. The story tells their destiny as young

[21] Vincent Canby, "Husband Back From War: Too Good to Be True?" *New York Times*, (5 February 1993), C8.

adults, after Roxy reveals to the free lad Thomas à Becket Driscoll that he is really her son and thus a slave. This is an impostor tale that gets to the heart of southern anxieties and reflects in ironic ways on matters of race and environment. Why is Thomas à Beckett Driscoll, brought up in the big house, dishonest and cowardly, and Valet de Chambre, brought up by Roxy as a slave, brave and ethical? Remaking these impostors in a film hundred years later would take much critical acumen, but it would be a more worthwhile challenge than replanting Artigat in Tennessee.

This essay has talked much about change, remaking, rethinking, with great attention to context. Impostors have been described as showing up the tensions of their times and as having stunning talents. Let me conclude by returning to some fixity. Just because there is universal appeal to an impostor tale does not mean we want consciously to deceive. Michel de Montaigne can be our guide here. On the one hand, he was tentative and cautious when it came to irrevocable death sentences, as in the Martin Guerre case. He was also self-reflective about his own poor memory and tendency to make mistakes. On the other hand, he summoned us to be as honest toward each other as we can, toward our contemporaries and toward those we think about across time. As he said, "We are human beings, and hold together only by our word."[22]

[22] Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, 1:9 in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Albert Thibuaudet and Maurice Rat (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 37.